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U.S. security lapses foster spy playground

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Overclassifying non-sensitive documents and inadequate resources are undermining efforts to stem espionage, leading American counterintelligence officials told a House subcommittee yesterday.

"We must face the ultimate reality that no matter what we do there will be other espionage cases in the years to come," L. Britt Snider, director of the Defense Department's counterintelligence office said. "There is no way to keep someone from becoming a spy if he chooses to do so."

Mr. Snider and officials from the Navy, the FBI and the General Accounting Office told the House Government Operations Subcommittee on Information and Justice that boosting resources and tightening controls on classified documents could help decrease the growing threat of espionage.

Yesterday's hearing was the first of a series planned to assess the magnitude of espionage in the United States and ways to prevent it. The hearings were called after the arrests of four Navy men, three of whom are related, on charges with passing government secrets to the Soviet Union.

"In a country that has become almost numbed by daily reports of violent crime, espionage cases still chill our blood," said Rep. Glenn English, D-Okla., subcommittee chairman. "Since espionage has become a mercenary activity in some people's minds, we should make sure that the price they pay when caught far exceeds the few thousand dollars they might stand to gain by selling out their country."

Rep. English, Mr. Snider, Bill W. Thurman, deputy director of the General Accounting Office's national security division and Philip A. Parker, deputy assistant director of the FBI, all said the number of classified documents should be limited.

Rep. English recommended reducing the number of employees able to obtain security clearances and standardizing regular reinvestigations of those already allowed to view sensitive documents.

GAO statistics released in March show 4.3 million civilians and military personnel had security clearances, an increase of 11 percent in 15 months. It is estimated that 16 million classified documents, excluding those from the National Security Agency, were generated last year.

"The proliferation of classified information and the numbers of persons with clearances can have unhealthy effects and, rather than improving security, can actually damage it as the whole classification process becomes cheapened," said Rep. English. He endorsed increasing financial resources and manpower for those agencies now underfunded.

Mr. Thurman, like the other witnesses that testified yesterday, refused to discuss specifically the arrests of John Walker, 47; his brother Arthur Walker, 50; John Walker's son Michael, 22; and Jerry Whitworth, 45, but noted several weaknesses now plaguing efforts to end espionage.

Two GAO studies of classified documents showed between 23 and 51 percent of sampled classified material was not sensitive under guidelines issued by the executive branch.

He also noted 2,400 reports were filed in fiscal year 1984 that questioned civilian and military personnel's possible security breaches. Of these, he said, only 24 individuals had clearances suspended.

Mr. Thurman said the guidelines

DOD gives to military contractors, which outline how sensitive material is to be handled, were "vague, outdated and inconsistent. We recommended that DOD improve the classification guidance given to contractors," he added, but "a lack of funding and personnel precluded any significant expansion" of existing programs.

All witnesses agreed with recent recommendations to reduce the number of individuals with security clearances. Defense Secretary Casper W. Weinberger last Tuesday ordered an immediate 10 percent reduction in security clearances issued to personnel, while Navy Secretary John F. Lehman Jr. said he wants a 50 percent reduction.

"In the past 10 years, hostile intelligence services have become increasingly aggressive," Mr. Parker of the FBI's intelligence division said. "The FBI believes, as does the rest of the federal government, that we must continue to enhance our counterintelligence and counter-measure programs without encroaching on the personal liberties of our citizens."